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THE SAD DEMISE, MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE, AND GLORIOUS TRIUMPH OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

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Abstract

Symbolic interactionism has changed over the past two decades, both in the issues that practitioners examine and in its position within the discipline. Once considered adherents of a marginal oppositional perspective, confronting the dominant positivist, quantitative approach of mainstream sociology, symbolic interactionists find now that many of their core concepts have been accepted. Simultaneously their core as an intellectual community has been weakened by the diversity of interests of those who self-identify with the perspective. I examine here four processes that led to these changes: fragmentation, expansion, incorporation, and adoption. I then describe the role of symbolic interactionism in three major debates confronting the discipline: the micro/macro debate, the structure/agency debate, and the social realist/interpretivist debate. I discuss six empirical arenas in which interactionists have made major research contributions: social coordination theory, the sociology of emotions, social constructionism, self and identity theory, macro-interactionism, and policy-relevant research. I conclude by speculating about the future role of interactionism.

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INTRODUCTION

A standard ploy of textbook writers is to divide all sociology into three parts: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Without assessing the dubious contemporary justifications of the first two, what should be made of the last at our *fin de siècle*? Where stands symbolic interaction—that distinctively American sociological approach, derived largely from interpretations of the teachings of George Herbert Mead; named by Herbert Blumer, over a half century ago;¹ inspired by the writings of William James, John Dewey, and Charles Horton Cooley; and provided an academic home in the first half of the twentieth century at the University of Chicago, by Robert Park, W.I. Thomas, and Everett Hughes. Has symbolic interaction become excessively fragmented or been incorporated into sociology, or has it triumphed in changing the discipline? As my title suggests, all three are partially true.²

Because of its intellectual tradition, organizational infrastructure, and active researchers, symbolic interaction is still too alive for an epitaph. Still, symbolic interaction ain't what it used to be. It occupies a very different place in the discipline from the time, 20 years ago, when it was labelled "the loyal opposition" (Mullins 1973)—a readily recognized social psychological, subjectivist, "micro," and qualitative stance. Such a view suggested that interactionism was "merely" reactive, rather than capable of creating a new vision. What is the place of symbolic interaction in contemporary sociology, and what role can it be expected to play in the future?

THE "NEW LOOK" IN INTERACTIONISM

Fragmentation, expansion, incorporation, and adoption—these processes together altered the character of symbolic interaction from a tight social network with a clear theoretical and research focus to a program with a slogan that increasingly masks a lack of coherence, the core ideas of which have been accepted and then taken for granted by the discipline.

¹ There have been numerous histories of the development of symbolic interactionism and its linkage with the Chicago school of sociology (see, for instance, Fisher & Strauss 1978, Harvey 1987, Lewis & Smith 1980)

² Symbolic interaction has been declared dead before, most notably in Nicholas Mullins' (1973, p. 98) infamous—to interactionists—claim that symbolic interactionism's influence "has come to an end." Institutionally, symbolic interaction with its several journals and vibrant organization—the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, founded in response to the obituary of Mullins and the harsh criticism of Huber (1973)—is very much alive.

Fragmentation

In the early decades of the development of symbolic interactionism, its central themes were lucidly presented and easy to stereotype; these stereotypes, as discussed below, had some validity. Herbert Blumer, his colleagues at the University of Chicago, and students elsewhere articulated the symbolic interactionist perspective and, in effect, policed the boundaries. Interactionism, like any “new” theoretical orientation, had deep and varied intellectual roots (e.g. Stryker 1980, Shalin 1984, Lewis & Smith 1980, Rochberg-Halton 1987), yet there was general agreement on its immediate parentage. While no unanimity existed as to the precise implications of the writings of George Herbert Mead (e.g. Miller 1973, Cottrell 1980), the primary source of the perspective of symbolic interactionism (and the meaning of Mead, for most interactionists) was the writings and teachings of Herbert Blumer. For many, Herbert Blumer *was* symbolic interactionism. After the Second World War, the cohort of graduate students at the University of Chicago expanded enormously. These students, many heavily influenced by Blumer and also by Everett Hughes, represented a new generation of scholars, who during their careers deepened, expanded, and transformed interactionism, contributing important empirical studies and beginning the process of exploring new models of cultural and social criticism (Denzin 1992, pp. 10–13).

Simultaneously a smaller group of interactionists was trained at the University of Iowa under the leadership of Manford Kuhn. Kuhn emphasized the testable assumptions of Mead’s concept of the situated self, often through questionnaire measures such as the Twenty Statements Test (e.g. Kuhn & McPartland 1954). As a consequence, textbook writers divided interactionism into a “Chicago School” and an “Iowa School.” This division was easy but misleading, particularly after Kuhn’s death, the waning of interest in the Twenty Statements Test, and the changes in sociology at Chicago. The Chicago school was subdivided among those who emphasized the empirical interests of Everett Hughes and those who built on the theoretical infrastructure of Blumer. After Kuhn’s death, the Iowa school played a lesser role in symbolic interaction, until its reformulation by Carl Couch and his students.

The reorientation of sociology in the late 1960s into a discipline with a greater openness to critical and qualitative perspectives led to competing nonpositivist perspectives that accepted as givens—to greater or lesser degree—the key tenets of interactionism. Symbolic interaction served as a convenient and welcoming home for many sociological “malcontents,” frustrated by functionalist orthodoxy. Further, as the interactionists trained in the late 1940s and 1950s developed their own dialects and trained students, the range of qualitative, interpretive approaches expanded, particularly as few students received “pure” interactionist training.

With each generation, the core beliefs of interactionism are becoming increasingly muddled, even though there remain components of interactionism that most who affiliate with this perspective hold to—notably a broad acceptance of Blumer's (1969, p. 2) classic three premises of symbolic interaction: that we know things by their meanings, that meanings are created through social interaction, and that meanings change through interaction.

The dissipation of the institutional centers of interactionist training—Iowa and Chicago, and later San Diego—militated against wide agreement on a core set of concepts, beyond broad premises. Symbolically the death of Herbert Blumer in 1986 closed the chapter in which it could be said that interactionism had a vivid identity. Although never providing a systematic statement of interactionist belief, Blumer served as an arbiter for what symbolic interactionism “really” meant (e.g. Blumer 1980). Even if not all accepted his interpretation (e.g. McPhail & Rexroat 1979, Stryker 1981), to reject it was to reject “Blumerian” symbolic interactionism.

Once interactionism may have had a partially deserved reputation as parochial and in-bred, but this is no longer deserved. In its post-Blumerian age, interactionism might be called intellectually promiscuous. Contemporary “interactionists” blend their interest in “classical” interactionism (micro-sociological, nonstatistical, robustly relativistic, and proudly anti-positivistic) with virtually all sociological traditions. As a result interactionists have integrated a “Blumerian” approach with theoretical approaches linked to Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Freud, Habermas, Baudrillard, Wittgenstein, Marx, Schutz, phenomenology, post-modern theory, feminism, semiotics, and behaviorism. What used to be a fairly narrow, tightly focused perspective now might be faulted for deemphasizing the traditional problems of situational definition, negotiation, impression management, and meaning creation that once animated symbolic interactionism.³ Revisionists, with some justice, have suggested that Blumer's writings (and those of other influential precursors, such as Znaniecki, Thomas, Cooley, and Park) reject a narrow and stereotypical microview of interactionism, and claim that such criticisms (Reynolds 1993) were never wholly accurate (Maines 1988, Tucker 1988).

In its fragmentation, symbolic interactionism seems bound mainly by a few broad tenets, an effective organizational infrastructure, and some active publication outlets. Of course, this may be all that many perspectives share. The post-modern, post-structural textual readings and cultural studies of Norman Denzin (1986) and Patricia Clough (1992) seem light-years from the precise experimentation and theory construction of Peter Burke (1980) and David Heise (1979). It is symptomatic of the degree of fragmentation that

³ This does not mean that no interactionists are concerned with these “old-fashioned” issues, but rather that what had been dominant now is less so.

some of the Blumerian “old guard” would question whether any of these are “real” interactionists. Similarly the realist, descriptive ethnographies of Ruth Horowitz (1983) and Elijah Anderson (1978) are entirely dissimilar from the intensely personal and self-reflexive accounts of Carolyn Ellis (1991) and John Van Maanen (1988).

Symbolic interactionism in the 1990s has a diversity that may vitiate its center. This splintering, of course, has benefits, in that diversity produces intellectual ferment. Yet, such a broadness raises the question of what, if anything, post-Blumerian symbolic interactionists share. Does a dominant model of symbolic interaction exist? Do the theorists who label themselves (or who are labeled) interactionists, belong to the same school? One response is that if a sufficient number of individuals label themselves or join an organization (the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction), then such a perspective exists. Yet, this degree of semi-coherence may raise questions about its justification as a perspective.

Expansion

Linked to the fragmentation of a once relatively unified perspective is a broad expansion of “legitimate” research topics. Symbolic interactionism was once criticized for a multitude of alleged and real sins. It was claimed to be apolitical (hence, supportive of the status quo), unscientific (hence, little more than tenured journalism), hostile to the classical questions of macrosociology (hence, limited to social psychology), and astructural (hence, fundamentally nonsociological). Critics might accept symbolic interactionist dominance over the study of face-to-face interaction and microrelations but reject its relevance elsewhere.

Although symbolic interaction may have been limited in content and style—a claim partly true, but never as accurate as critics claimed (see Maines 1988, Wood & Wardell 1983)—the same can hardly be said today. In responding to criticism, interactionists have developed concepts that connect to the macro and structural demands of sociology (e.g. Kleinman & Fine 1979, Prendergast & Knottnerus 1993). Below I discuss contemporary research and theoretical developments, many of which (social coordination theory, macro-interactionism, applied sociology) are distinctly outside of what symbolic interactionists had once typically claimed for their domain.

Recent attempts to link symbolic interaction to chaos theory (Young 1991), uses and gratification research (Altheide 1985), social ecology (Frese & Roebuck 1980), or to theories of the development of civilization (Couch 1984) mark the extent to which interactionists connect their approach to the broad span of academic knowledge. The belief that symbolic interaction is antagonistic to mainstream social science has been refuted in the past two decades

and replaced by the confidence that this perspective contributes a new dimension to traditional topics.

Incorporation

With expansion of the topic areas of symbolic interaction has come increased borrowing from other disciplinary arenas. Symbolic interactionists have incorporated other theoretical approaches to invigorate their own perspective. Writings that explicitly attempt to blend symbolic interaction and cultural studies (Denzin 1992, McCall & Becker 1989) are a model of the incorporative turn. Likewise the call for a “synthetic interactionism” (Fine 1992a), blending diverse theoretical treatments of agency and structure, calls for interactionists to incorporate other models with a Blumerian perspective.

The willingness to borrow ideas suggests the absence of a fortress mentality. Attempts to link interactionism with Marxist and critical theory (e.g. Batiuk & Sacks 1981, Ashley 1985), Parsonian theory (Alexander 1987, Sciulli 1988), or to Vygotsky, Piaget, or Bruner and others in child development (Corsaro & Rizzo 1988, Winter & Goldfield 1991) all reveal the desire to learn from other intellectually vital sources. While these attempts at outreach may fragment coherence, a pragmatic approach should find such linkage bracing; after all, one should use the most productive tools. While a pragmatic approach denies that anything necessarily goes, it examines outcomes without presuppositions.

Reading the past decade of *Symbolic Interaction* and *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* uncovers journals with a diversity approaching the discipline’s flagship journals. Without conscious planning, symbolic interaction has been repeatedly remade. One finds within interactionism, experimental, statistical analysis, secondary analysis of survey data, theoretical treatments that are grounded in literary criticism, ethnomethodologically inspired conversation analysis, European social theory, and policy-relevant applied sociology. In contrast, in the early years of the journals the thrust of most articles was limited to traditional concerns: the creation of meaning from interaction, the social creation of self and identity, and the history and theoretical contributions of the founders. While this “normal science” does continue, it has become less recognizable as the main task of the perspective.

Adoption

Just as interactionists have borrowed from others, so have they been borrowed from. During the 1980s the texts of George Herbert Mead were discovered by a generation of social theorists (Collins 1989, Joas 1985, Habermas 1987) who in general had little knowledge of classic symbolic interaction. The star of Goffman continued to rise. He was frequently acknowledged as the most

influential American sociologist of the twentieth century, outstripping Parsons, Homans, and Blumer.

It would be fair to claim, although difficult to demonstrate, that by the early 1990s many mainstream sociologists were accepting meaning construction, negotiation, impression management, and labelling as components of their sociology. A case in point is the inspiration provided by the writings of John Dewey for Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1991) in their post-Tocqueville analysis of America, *The Good Society*. Likewise the use of qualitative methods and interactionist concepts by the authors of Alan Wolfe's (1991) collection of essays on contemporary America, *The Recentering of America*, reveals the diffusion of the perspective. The *New Institutionalism* (Dimaggio & Powell 1991, Meyer & Rowan 1977) is also grounded on a cultural and qualitative understanding of how the conditions of work are linked to the analysis of organizational fields and economic structures. Meyer (1992), for instance, writes of the influence of Berger & Luckmann's (1966) interpretivist classic, *The Social Construction of Reality*, on his own research. This does not mean that structural theorists have accepted interactionism as their dominant theoretical model, or that they identify with the perspective, or even that they always recognize where their ideas come from, but increasingly interactionist constructs are integrated into the body of sociological thought.⁴ To be sure, some of this involves "the new Columbus syndrome," renaming what has gone before, but in other instances the writers are very aware of their debts. Saxton (1989) argues persuasively that interactionist writers have a social scientific epistemology that solves generic problems of analysis in a post-positivist period. Contextualists and constructionists in social psychology (Gergen 1982, Shotter 1986, Rosnow & Georgeourdi 1986), and the new ethnographers and interpretive theorists in anthropology (Clifford & Marcus 1986, Geertz 1980), despite their differences, had discovered an epistemological tradition similar to that which symbolic interactionists had been developing for half a century. Similarly the revolution within communications theory owed much to interactionist analysis (Carey 1989).

The appeal of interactionist concepts further blurred the boundary between those who are and are not interactionists. With these ideas spread so widely one can claim that interactionism as a bounded sociological perspective is in danger, even in its period of greatest triumph. The pages of book catalogs and leading journals are filled with scholarship that is compatible, though not identical with, interactionism: for instance, theories grounded in the writings of Bakhtin, Foucault, and Derrida. With the perspective so internally

⁴It must be admitted that some scholars see the field as divided into hostile camps (e.g. Lofland 1990). I examine the same evidence and see a more pastoral condition. In true interactionist fashion, there is no "true" condition, rather a set of analytical preferences.

fragmented and so many others drawing upon it, the difference is narrowing between those who self-identify with interactionism and the many who do not, although they accept basic interactionist premises.

INTERACTIONIST DEBATES

Taken together, the processes of fragmentation, expansion, incorporation, and adoption suggest that contemporary symbolic interactionism is in an awkward period of triumph and growth, coupled with acceptance by the mainstream which may presage the disappearance of its unique contributions. The tension of interactionism's increasing centrality is evident in a set of contemporary scholarly debates—debates that demand that interactionists address issues confronting the whole of sociology. While these debates overlap, each has been played out in the pages of national journals. Specifically I examine the contribution of the interactionist approach to: (i) the debate over the macro-micro link in sociology, (ii) the agency/structure debate, and (iii) the division between social realists and interpretivists.

The Micro-Macro Debate

Along with exchange theory and rational choice models, symbolic interactionism represents the dominant “micro”-version of sociology. Long before the micro-macro debate was named and joined, the connection between levels of analysis represented a major interactionist concern. The writings of Anselm Strauss and his colleagues (1964; see Strauss 1978, Fine 1984) in the early 1960s presented the “negotiated order” paradigm and explicitly placed organizational analysis on the interactionist agenda. Strauss believed that organization could be understood from the bottom up; that is, macro-structures could be understood from a micro-analytic foundation. Strauss did not ignore the effects of structure on meanings and interactions, but these were less his focus. The extension of research on organizational life led to a recognition that institutions had an important role in constraining meaning (Nichols 1991, Lynxwiler et al 1983), channeling interaction (Hall 1987), and “embedding” the construction of social forms (Gubrium 1992, Holstein 1993), even if these macro-structures did not totally determine meaning and interaction.

In many ways the macro-micro debate was fought on interactionist turf (Shalin 1986), even if not all of the participants in the early stages were fully aware of its relevance. Erving Goffman's (1983) ASA presidential address, “*The Interaction Order*,” provided an interactionist charter for confronting the traditional concerns of sociology with the social order. Likewise, the concept of “interaction ritual chains” was an attempt to argue that micro-interaction preceded structure (Collins 1981) and harkened back to Blumer's (1969) emphasis on knitting together lines of action. Others described the

sedimentation of meaning (Busch 1982) and macrostructure as collective behavior (Blankenship 1976, Bucher 1962). Interactionists have attempted to link the macro-micro levels by postulating a middle level: the meso-structure (Maines 1982). Here structure is mediated through individual actions, coordinated by patterns and expectations (see Levy 1982, Kleinman 1982, Pestello & Voydanoff 1991). It has been the particular contribution of the interactionist perspective to recognize that the mesoscopic level will permit sociologists to examine the social dynamics that permit institutions, organizations, economic order, and state regimes to compel commitment or obedience from individual actors.

Ultimately interactionists, like others in the debate, concluded that a fixed distinction between levels is misleading (Wiley 1988, Law 1984), suggesting that institutions of all sizes can be analyzed using similar analytical tools. Some argue for a seamless sociology which recognizes that “separate” levels are actually intertwined and indivisible, with micro analyses implicated in macro ones, and vice versa (Fine 1990b). The debate has been important in its attempt to bridge theory groups, bringing micro-sociologists into intellectual and personal contact with macro-sociologists, breaching subdisciplinary isolation. One reason it can plausibly be claimed that symbolic interaction has disappeared, although not by name, is the success of the argument that all levels of analysis must be considered in an adequate analysis. The rare micro-sociologist (whether in exchange theory, ethnomethodology, or symbolic interaction) disdains interest in questions of larger institutions. In turn, most macro-sociologists (structuralist, Marxist, or institutionalist) now accept a vision of structures ultimately grounded on the actions of participants, even if they do not emphasize the power of the actor as much as interactionists.

The Agency/Structure Debate

Few issues are so central to the symbolic interactionist perspective as personal agency. The claim that interactionists only believe in agentic choices has been a frequent criticism of the perspective. Still, the balance between structure and agency is at the heart of the interactionist approach to social order. Ultimately social order depends on how agents confront, use, manipulate, and remake structure (Dawe 1978), directly and through mediating individuals, and how social institutions take individuals into account. The interactionist recognizes that much of the world is not of an individual's making (e.g. systems of patriarchy or class) and can only be understood in the context of the circumstances in which these social realities are expressed.

As is true with so many newly discovered issues, the linkage of agency and structure in interactionism has a long pedigree (Baldwin 1988)—a concern implicitly addressed in the writings of Mead, Cooley, Blumer, Goffman and others. How do individuals negotiate the realities that are structured—that can

be ignored only by those willing to accept severe consequences—and how do structures determine what actors can or will do? Concepts such as obdurate-ness, constraint, negotiation, sedimentation, symbolization, identification, ritualization—each grounded in traditional interactionist analysis—connect the actor with the limits of choice (Fine 1992a). The goal is the Goffmanian one of developing an understanding of the “interaction order” that does justice to both order and interaction, asking not which definitions are possible, but also what definitions are likely and what the consequences are for those who ignore the definitions.

Fundamentally the perspective depends not on individual action but on collective meaning creation—on collectivities of any size, although there is debate on the extent to which meaning is continuously being generated. For instance, an interactionist view of collective and crowd behavior seems to drain from individual agents much of their individuality, providing the crowd with the ability to transform actors (McPhail 1989). The “structure” (sedimented individual meanings) is powerful. Attempting to link human action with the obdurate reality of the environment—a structure external to the actor—Weigert (1991) speaks of a type of behavior he labels “transverse interaction.” Actors recognize the physical environment as a symbolic other and use this understanding to structure their interaction with a “generalized other.” The relationship between actors and objects is not just meaningful but, in a peculiar sense, can be said to be interaction (Cohen 1989). Because interaction is set within institutions and responds to obdurate reality, an adequate interactionist analysis must take structure into account. Ultimately “interactionism is both a theory of experience and a theory of social structure” (Denzin 1992, p. 3).

The Social Realist/Interpretivist Debate

Interactionists have often been often described, and sometimes describe themselves, as fundamentally antiscientific and antipositivist. In a sense this is true, but such a claim misses the diversity of the perspective and simultaneously ignores the fact that those who questioned standard quantitative methods, such as Mead, could see themselves as “scientific.” Thus, symbolic interactionism has been “haunted by a double-edged specter” (Denzin 1992, p.2). While arguing for an interpretive, subjective study of human experience, interactionists also hope to create a science of human conduct, a social realist approach based on natural scientific criteria. While this debate has been exemplified in the writings of specific scholars (e.g. Manford Kuhn vs Herbert Blumer), it is also evident within the “privileged texts” of the perspective, such as Blumer’s (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism*. How can one be objective while still being subjective? All attempts to resolve the dilemma are ultimately unpersuasive, and the debate continues.

Symbolic interactionism is more methodologically diverse than it is frequently given credit for, particularly if one is willing to include interactionists who study self-concept and identity formation (Rosenberg 1979, Burke 1980). Others disdain these data collection techniques, and following literary critics, analyze texts as rhetoric (e.g. Gusfield 1976).

The methodological conflicts between the so-called Chicago and Iowa schools still reverberate (Falk & Anderson 1983), and some claim that symbolic interactionism is divided between humanists and positivists (Warshay & Warshay 1987). The issue of the inevitability of causality (Lindesmith 1981) continues to divide interactionists. However, these divisions may be exaggerated as most interactionists accept the systematic collection of data, whether through in-depth-interviewing, ethnography, introspection, or surveys.

Social realists believe that one can collect and analyze data that reflect with some fidelity social reality (Farberman 1991, p. 477), while radical subjectivists and post-modernists see data as a discursive strategy, a second-order reality, a text that must continually be questioned and subverted (Clough 1989, Schneider 1991, Richardson 1992).

The chasm between an interpretivist and a social realist approach is central to understanding the diversity of contemporary symbolic interactionism. Both approaches have become more sophisticated in their theoretical development and in their methodology, and they are progressing in substantially different directions. Are they still wings of a single perspective in a meaningful sense when they cannot agree on epistemology: whether the world is ultimately knowable?

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST DOMAINS

Ultimately schools are known for what their practitioners accomplish: they are activity systems. The growth of qualitative, interpretivist, and interactionist approaches to sociology depends on the power of lines of research. A brief survey cannot hope to do justice to all of the active empirical lines, but I examine some of the more significant areas: (i) social coordination theory, (ii) emotion work and experience, (iii) social constructionism, (iv) the creation of selves, (v) macro-interactionism, and (VI) policy-relevant interactionism.

Social Coordination Theory

The explication of universal processes that explain social interaction through formal, generic principles is a long-standing goal for social realists who strive for systematic principles of knowledge (Prus 1987). As Rock (1979, p. 53; see Zerubavel 1980) notes, symbolic interaction is deeply indebted to Simmelian theory and methods.

Perhaps the most compelling and ambitious on-going research program within interactionism, specifying the generic principles of collective action, is that of Carl Couch and his students. For the past 25 years they have explored how social units coordinate their activities. This theory of social coordination provides interactionism with a set of universal social principles, which Couch (1992, p. 130) likens to both geometry and the chemical periodic table. Through a series of edited volumes (Couch & Hintz 1975, Couch et al 1986), books (Couch 1989), and articles, largely in interactionist journals and annuals, they have elaborated the processes and the conditions of co-presence.

Couch (1984, p. 8; Miller et al 1975) argues that for a cooperative act to unfold, interactants must: (i) establish co-presence, (ii) demonstrate reciprocal attention, (iii) reveal mutual responsiveness, (iv) create congruent functional identities, (v) build a shared focus, and (vi) devise a social objective. In establishing a sociable relationship, interactants establish a shared past and a projected future (Katovich & Couch 1992, Maines et al 1983). A social relationship or group develops traditions and an idioculture (Fine 1979, Wiley 1991). The existence of similar social pasts (proximal and distal, common and shared) permits actors rapidly and un-self-consciously to reconfigure their responses. Couch's efforts in formulating principles of coordinated action parallel Mead, Cooley, and Blumer's concern with adjusting to specific and generalized others. Indeed, some experimental research, arising from the interactionist tradition, suggests that the coordination is remarkably subtle, producing unintended temporal symmetry in microsocial relations (Gregory 1983).

Couch's goal is ultimately nothing less than to create a sociology grounded on the micro-level, wherein dyads, triads and other groups create social processes, recognizing that invariant processes provide the building blocks of a formal sociological theory that will provide understanding of how dyads and larger groupings coordinate their actions in organizations and interaction sequences.

Methodologically Couch (1987) and his colleagues have a different stance from many symbolic interactionists. In some measure they transcend the apparently sharp distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. While their data collection may occur in the laboratory (Couch & Weiland 1986, Katovich 1987) or in field settings (Seckman & Couch 1989, Katovich & Diamond 1986), the intent is the same. They collect specimens of social transactions produced by dyads, triads, and in a few cases larger collectivities in situations that are structurally similar. Each laboratory simulation (e.g. of negotiating teams) serves in effect as an ethnographic site, but rather than exploring what grounds that interaction situationally in local culture, they extract universal principles. The "ethnography" of the social coordinationist may seem casual in that it is not based on lengthy immersion in the setting,

but rather is designed to observe similar, routine interactions, a form of theoretical sampling. It is not surprising that social coordination theorists are particularly interested in routine saleswork (e.g. Katovich & Diamond 1986, Prus 1989)—these situations recur and provide opportunities for assessing generic concepts. Because these researchers search for universals, rather than comparative statements, statistical tests are not relevant. The large-scale, immersion ethnography favored by the grounded theorist also is not called for, in that learning about any particular group and its local situatedness is not crucial, nor are subjective accounts.

Emotion Work and Experience

In the past 20 years sociologists have discovered emotion as a subject (Gordon 1981), a topic largely situated within a broadly defined symbolic interactionist perspective. Emotions are understood as embodied, a class of experienced reality (Denzin 1984a); as a form of cognitive evaluation, as affect control; and as arising from the social world, as part of the dramaturgical skills that individuals use to cope with the social order (Hochschild 1983). Interactionists treat emotions as “lived experience” (part of a post-modern, phenomenological turn), as “cognitive constructions,” linked to social meanings, and as “emotion work” (an interactional strategy of impression management). While these approaches to emotion are distinct, some promising attempts have been made to integrate them (Johnson 1992, Scheff 1983, Thoits 1989).

EMBODIED EMOTION Emotions are experienced by human bodies, not only filtered through social demands, although the social context of the emotions ultimately determines what is felt. “Emotion” in Norman Denzin’s (1985, p. 225) terms is “self-feeling”—affecting a lived body, given meaning by an actor in a social world. Denzin argues that emotion is a primary window into the self, simultaneously constructed to situate its meaning in community. Temporality (Flaherty 1987, 1992, Fine 1990a), physical contact (Denzin 1984b), and the “natural” environment (Fine 1992b, Mitchell 1983, Weigert 1991), while not emotion as such, are also states that are directly experienced and embodied, and are connected to primary emotions (e.g. boredom, fear, exhilaration). Those who study the chronically ill and dying (Charmaz 1991) find that the embodied feelings of dis-ease, and not only the social definitions given to “the sick,” provide social meaning and identity transformations.

To understand emotions as a primary reality, some researchers have emphasized the value of self-reflection. In an influential and controversial article, Carolyn Ellis (1991) calls for “sociological introspection” to help comprehend what emotions feel like: in her case the dramatic personal effects of her partner’s chronic illness and death. Such uncompromising honest

accounts can be uncomfortable reading, but they hew to the demands of social phenomenology: to capture lived experience.

AFFECT CONTROL A second interactionist approach to emotions, affect control theory (Heise 1979, Smith-Lovin & Heise 1988, Robinson & Smith-Lovin 1992), results from a cross-fertilization between cognitive social psychology and “structural” symbolic interactionism (especially identity theory—Stryker 1981). Drawing from within and outside classical interactionism, these researchers emphasize measurable social identity. Through participating in situations, actors adopt social identities that mark their self-defined relationships to those with whom they interact, and a failure to establish such relations leads to emotional distress (Thoits 1983). The meanings of these identities are analyzed on three core dimensions: evaluation (good/bad), potency (powerful/powerless), and activity (active/inactive). By measuring an actor’s definitions through experimental research or questionnaires, researchers examine change (or deflection) of these definitions as a result of independent variables. Affect control theory argues that actors construct events to confirm their meanings about self and others, minimizing deflections. Emotions are signals about the extent to which events confirm or disconfirm identity. One may generate emotions from an identity or from the character of the situation. Emotional responses are a function of both the situational definition and the recognized social identity of the definer. In this model, the dynamics are primarily cognitive, and in a real sense emotions emerge from definitions, rather than being generated as a direct consequence of external stimuli.

In contrast to the experiential approach to emotions, affect control theory demands precise experimental methods—a far cry from what has been taken as the traditional interactionist methodological dicta. To the degree that affect control theory depends on symbolic interactionist assumptions of the social construction of self, it provides another indicator of the blurring of lines between interactionism and “mainstream” sociology.

EMOTION WORK A third approach explores emotions as social constructions and strategies for impressing others. These researchers are less interested in how emotion is experienced or internally generated than in how emotion is performed as a consequence of the demands of social situations and culture; this approach draws heavily on dramaturgical analysis.

From Goffman’s (1959) early writing onward, the examination of social life as dramatic and designed to persuade has been critical to interactionism. This approach, generally known as the “strategic paradigm” (Lofland & Lofland 1984), has focused on how social actors manage their performances in their verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal aspects. Even in Goffman’s early

writing, he emphasizes that emotions are strategic, and that social actors are socialized in their use. Emotions are linked to identity work (Snow & Anderson 1987, Clark 1987). Just as individuals select emotions to display, so can other actors channel the propriety of certain emotions, such as grief (Rosenblatt 1988, Lofland 1985). Organizational demands and occupational roles shape how people express emotion and sometimes may even affect how they feel (Hochschild 1983, Zurcher 1985, Gubrium 1992). In this view, emotions are learned behavior and controllable, and “feeling rules” exist that determine when and which emotions will be performed.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Symbolic interaction has long been embedded in the examination of social problems, certainly from Mills’s (1942) analysis of the social rhetoric and accounts surrounding the definition of social problems. Labelling theory (Becker 1963) developed from interactionist constructs, recognizing that the public is at least as much involved in the creation of deviance as is the purported deviant. Over the past 30 years, labeling theory has been criticized, expanded, and altered, and is a subtype of theories that have come to be known as “social constructionism” (Schneider 1985). Labeling theory is a “micro” variant on the Durkheimian emphasis on the need of a society to establish boundaries (Erikson 1963), focusing attention on the reaction of social actors, rather than on societal understandings. Ultimately the interactionist approach to “social problems,” and indeed to all spheres of knowledge, is to examine the ways in which boundaries are established and defended (Zerubavel 1991, Gieryn 1983).

The social constructionist approach provides a means by which interactionists address the institutional formulation of social problems. Why are some patterns of action defined as “problematic,” while others are “normalized”? In the classic formulation (Spector & Kitsuse 1977): How are social problems constructed? The “social constructionist” approach permits interactionists to examine dynamic, historical processes affecting the social system, such as “the medicalization of deviance” (Conrad & Schneider 1980). Constructionism has come to dominate social problems theory, but its elaboration has developed its own splits and theoretical controversies (Holstein & Miller 1993). For instance, there is active debate between those who emphasize that all meaning (and, hence, the existence of “objective” conditions) should be problematized (Woolgar & Pawluch 1985), suggesting that sociological knowledge is as constructed as the rhetoric of social problems actors, and those who accept the existence of objective conditions, while wishing to focus on the processes by which some of these conditions become a part of public debate (Best 1989), suggesting that sociologists can, to some

degree be “honest brokers.” Cultural conditions (Fine & Christophorides 1991), institutional realities (Hilgartner & Bosk 1988), and the role of claim makers (Pfohl 1977) all contribute to determining what enters public debate. The constructionist view has become so dominant that it is rare to read a sociological treatment of a social problem that does not allude to the way in which the recognition of a social problem is a function of extra-objective criteria.

Constructionism is not limited to the examination of social problems but applies to the creation of all social life, tied to W.I. Thomas’s classic claim that situations must be defined and that these choices have real consequences. The social construction of everything is not merely a joking claim; it is fundamental and increasingly accepted as part of the sociological worldview. For instance, the interactionist view of psychosis (Rosenberg 1984) is based on the patient’s inability to take the role of the other and make “proper” (consensual) attributions—in other words, to be unable to construct the social world in a manner that coordinates with the perspectives of others. We use whatever is handy to construct our own selves—including our physical locations or clothing—and to construct identities and character of others as well (Stone 1962, Weigert 1986, Hood 1984, Davis 1992). Any piece of symbolic driftwood is added to these constructions. The active model of social interpretation is a well-recognized feature of much contemporary sociological writing.

Erving Goffman’s (1974) treatment of frame analysis, drawing on Gregory Bateson, Kenneth Burke, and W.I. Thomas, examines how actors know what class of activity is going on (e.g. teasing, experimentation, fraud, or fantasy play). Frame analysis probably has the most dramatic impact in social movements research. Scholars in this tradition (Gamson et al 1982, Snow et al 1986), while not using “frame” precisely as Goffman did, argue that the rhetorical techniques by which movement entrepreneurs define a claim has real effects on public responses and organizational growth.

Interactionists argue that even the past is constructed—time and history are not immutable, but their meaning results from situational appropriateness and the activities of moral entrepreneurs. Thus, interactionists turn backward trying to understand historical events and, as significantly, how historical events are given weight. That temporal categories have not always had the same meaning was persuasively argued by Eviatar Zerubavel (1981). Holidays, weeks, and years are not given by a temporally fixed universe but are constructed socially, with attendant symbolic meaning. So, too, we construct the memorialization of events and persons (Schwartz 1987, Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991), which can be the source of drama (Gross 1986), communal identification (Billig 1991), contention (Gregory & Lewis 1988), and self (Davis 1979). Everything is potentially up for grabs; that everything isn’t

actually heeds the obdurate character of structure, power, and sedimented meanings.

THE CREATION OF SELVES

Sociological social psychology, marginalized in the 1970s, has reemerged to contribute to the broadening of the discipline. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rejuvenation of the sociological study of the self, identity, and social role. The development of the social and symbolic self, a root issue of symbolic interaction from James, Cooley, and Mead, is central to interactionist research and theory and includes such issues as self-esteem, self-feeling, self-concept, identity work, and self-presentation.

Symbolic interactionism, as practiced by those sociologists trained by Everett Hughes at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s and early 1950s, tended to deemphasize self in favor of situation; the sociology of Erving Goffman, implying that there was no deeply held “real” self, only a set of masks, was a prototype for this view. Yet, despite the attention to situation, interactionists such as Ralph Turner (1976, 1978) emphasized that the creation of the self results from social and cultural trends. Hewitt (1989), for instance, argues that a basic conflict appears in American selves between individualism (independence) and community participation (interdependence).

While interactionists hold that no “real, true, core” self can be found, analyses of how selves develop are part of interactionist analysis—both by interpretivist theorists associated with a post-modern literary analysis, and by social realists who are more closely connected to experimentation and hypothesis testing. Interactionism pictures the self as symbolic, situationally contingent, and structured.

Describing the interpretivist view as “post-modern” does not do full justice to this approach, which is grounded in equal measure in feminist theory. The shared interests of interactionists and feminist researchers emphasize the “gendered” quality of self—that is, self is not biologically given, but is created from social demands and responses to those demands (Wiley 1991). The recognition of gender has affected research in all domains of sociology, but nowhere more significantly than in self-research. Given the frequent, though not universal, argument that gender is socially constructed (Kaufman 1991, Krieger 1983), feminist sociology is a natural ally for interactionism (see Deegan & Hill 1987).

Self is generated through rhetoric and story-telling by oneself (Denzin 1987, Miller 1991) or others (Adler & Adler 1991: ch. 6) and the manipulation of other symbols (Schwalbe 1983). The literary creation of self has become prominent in interactionist writing (Richardson 1992, Rambo Ronai 1992). The self is the text. Some playfully link Mead’s “I” to “irony” (Tam 1984).

The literary, verbal, symbolic construction of self is one pole of the interactionist approach to self.

A second pole is identity theory, which agrees that self is constructed, but rather than seeing this construction as creation, here the self is constructed through adjustment. The issue is for the actor to fit his/her self into the dominant character of the situation or structure: adjusting to an obdurate reality (Brown 1991). This parallels the emphases in affect control theory. As in affect control theory, identity theory can be tested through experimental and questionnaire techniques. Theorists such as Stryker (1980) and Rosenberg (1979) attempt to specify the predictable process by which role-making and changes in self-image occur. Others such as Ralph Turner, Viktor Gecas, and Louis Zurcher examine the fluidity of role-constructs, while admitting that these “mutable selves” (Zurcher 1977) have spatial, institutional, and temporal stability.

All interactionists, however distinct their theoretical grounding, methodological choices, and assumptions about the proper level of stability and reification, agree that self is not an object that has inherent meaning, but is a construct that is given meaning through an actor’s choices, mediated by the relationships, situations, and cultures in which she or he is embedded.

MACROINTERACTIONISM

The easy charge had always been that symbolic interaction was a micro sociological perspective, with no interest in structure, no belief in the power of organizations and institutions, and no constructs to examine such issues (Maines 1988, Strauss 1991, Hall 1987). As noted earlier when considering the macro-micro debate, such a charge had always been misleading, as Blumer (1969), for instance, regularly wrote about “acting units,” rather than actors. Yet, in recent years, interactionists have more self-consciously addressed macro-sociological issues, using the intermediate level of mesostructure.

This emphasis received prominence in the influential survey article by David Maines (1977) in the *Annual Review of Sociology*, “Social Organization and Social Structure in Symbolic Interactionist Thought,” emphasizing the interactionist tradition of concern with structure, institutions, and organizations (see Overington & Mangham 1982). The concepts of negotiated order (Kahne & Schwartz 1978), constraint (Denzin 1977, Farberman 1975), network (Fine & Kleinman 1983, Faulkner 1983), collective activity (Becker 1982, Gilmore 1988), and symbolic meaning (Schmitt 1991, Manning 1992) provide an entrée to macroanalysis.

A compatible perspective has been developed by organizational theorists who recognize the importance of the lived experience of being in organizations (Dimaggio & Powell 1991, Hodson 1991) and the effects of webs of meaning

and culture in organizational life (Pfeffer 1981, Ouchi & Wilkins 1985). Some organizational theorists suggest that organizations are characterized by “loosely coupled” systems (Weick 1976), are fundamentally anarchic (Cohen et al 1972), and have recognizable cultures (Zucker 1977, Kamens 1977). That actors are “corporate” in that they represent positions or agencies does not mean that the interactionist perspective on social action is irrelevant. That these are “symbolic persons” makes the dramaturgical and interpretive perspective more powerful, if it admits that these actors are motivated by corporate impression management and limited by organizational structures.

While interactionists have much to accomplish in opening their approach to the economic and political analysis of social systems (but see Burawoy 1979, Smith 1991), there is a compelling argument that organizational fields (Strauss 1982) are structured through symbolic negotiation, and, as a consequence, there is little difference from small-scale negotiations. Ultimately a localized economic organization—a market of sellers and buyers—emerges from the structural conditions in which it is embedded. While seemingly far distant from the examination of interaction systems, all large-scale systems are ultimately grounded in the symbolic constructs that individuals use in coping with their local reality.

POLICY-RELEVANT INTERACTIONISM

According to some critics, interactionists are little concerned about ameliorating the world around them, and are fundamentally apolitical and apathetic (Gouldner 1970, Huber 1973). Such a charge is strange aimed at an approach that descends from pragmatic philosophy, perhaps the American philosophical tradition with the greatest commitment to improving the world. Both Mead (Shalin 1987) and Blumer (Wellman 1988) had strong political leanings, evident in their writing. Mead was a progressive activist, involved in Chicago progressive politics. Blumer was, for portions of his career, a labor mediator and held strong opinions about racial discrimination. Indeed, Blumer’s first major empirical study, funded by the Payne Study and Experiment Fund (Blumer 1933) had a specific policy focus—to examine the effects of film on youth (Denzin 1992, Clough 1988).

Two arguments have been advanced to explain why interactionists are not actively involved in policy debate and political action: one methodological and one theoretical. Methodologically it is asserted that since interactionists often avoid statistical techniques, their conclusions are viewed skeptically by policy opponents, who claim that the bias of the individual researcher infects the data. No doubt when policy makers were themselves convinced of the desirability of having precise, “objective,” and confirmable data this was so,

but there is an increased willingness to examine evaluations tied to the understanding of actors (Patton 1980).

Theoretically interactionists believe that truth is a social construct, but that position cannot be equated with claiming that any course of action is as good as another. Yet, if truth is grounded in one's perspective, this seems to suggest that state action, constraining individual choice, is unwarranted, because no person could make a responsible choice for another. As a result interactionism is seen as profoundly anarchic (Lofland 1988) or libertarian (Fine 1993). Yet, if one specifies collective goals, admittedly from a political or cultural stance, researchers can suggest how those goals or means can be achieved. Further, a radical relativist position has never been central to interactionism, as obdurate realities and collective meanings have long been recognized. While it might be argued on an esoteric theoretical level that racial discrimination or battering children could be defined as right, within the society in which we reside, within our universe of discourse, such choices are abhorrent.

Interactionists have addressed both the general issue of policy research (Estes & Edmonds 1981), and specific applied and policy domains (Kreps 1989, Glassner & Freedman 1979, Corbin & Strauss 1988). Indeed, symbolic interaction is now increasingly influential in such "professional" fields as social work, nursing, education, and theater arts. In practice, interactionist research demonstrates its value for those who wish to make the world a better and more secure place in which to live.

WHENCE SYMBOLIC INTERACTION?

One is challenged to take the measure of a broad and vibrant perspective: contemporary symbolic interaction is both. In my title, I raise a triple paradox: how can interactionism simultaneously be in a state of demise, disappearance, and triumph. Each claim refers to the phenomena described above: fragmentation, expansion, incorporation, and adoption of symbolic interaction. Those characteristics that once propelled symbolic interactionism into its distinctive oppositional stance now have less significance, raising the question of whether the position of symbolic interactionism has been redefined. Will symbolic interactionism confront the discipline from outside, or have substantial changes already occurred, altering the mission of those who draw on Blumer's Three Premises? Like many "special" populations, have we been mainstreamed?

DEMISE In one sense, no demise in symbolic interaction is evident: the theory has not been discarded as old, irrelevant, wrong, or useless. Organizationally growth has occurred. Perhaps some would argue there has been a decline in the number of graduate students or centers for training, but one might respond

that graduate training is less narrow. Rather, the demise—if we label it that—results from fragmentation and the feeling that few core beliefs are universally accepted. The death of Herbert Blumer cost the perspective its charismatic leader. The journal *Symbolic Interaction* publishes articles by those who do not see themselves as interactionists and are not so labelled by others. Others who are intellectually compatible with interactionism do not use that term to describe themselves, not because they see it as stigmatizing, but because it is irrelevant. Central assumptions have faded as the generators of research and have not been replaced: the perspective is multifocal. The center did not hold.

DISAPPEARANCE As long as a journal, an organization, and people who choose the label exist, symbolic interactionism will not disappear. Yet, the lines separating this perspective and the discipline as a whole have become blurred and uncertain. In other words, the concepts of interactionism have been given over to the mainstream. It is not just the lack of a center, but the existence of a periphery that does not belong to the perspective alone. Will we need a group of sociologists who choose to label themselves by this ancient moniker, while others share their work?

TRIUMPH As noted, the concepts of interactionism have become the concepts of much sociology. This is surely not an insignificant achievement for a perspective that had recently been written off as intellectually exhausted. The leading journals of the discipline now regularly publish qualitative, interpretive research, written from numerous angles. Social constructionism, the sociology of emotions, identity theory, the post-modern turn, organizational culture, negotiated order, frame analysis, rhetorical analysis, the reconstruction of the past, the sociology of temporality, and the analysis of gender, class, and race as situated achievements all rest on interactional frameworks, even if contributions to these arenas are broader than from interactionism alone.

If the goal of symbolic interaction is to maintain itself as a distinctive oppositional movement, then it has failed, with more and more outsiders addressing central issues and more and more insiders stepping outside the boundaries, not caring about their badges of courage. Yet, if the ultimate goal is to develop the pragmatic approach to social life—a view of the power of symbol creation and interaction—then symbolic interaction has triumphed gloriously.

Predicting the future is dangerous, but it is evident that the label symbolic interaction will abide—it hosts a cheery and sociable club. Its journals will remain strong. Yet, we will find more intermarriage, more interchange, and

more interaction. Symbolic interaction will serve as a label of convenience for the future, but will it serve as a label of thought?

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